

Weapons of the American Revolution

Historic Document



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The American Revolution was a very personal war. Weapons had relatively short effective ranges, and most battles were decided in direct hand-to-hand combat with bayonet, sword or axe and spear. Each soldier could usually see his opponent as a person, not a faceless statistic in the distance. In the Colonial period the basic ammunition for small arms was lead. The ammunition for almost all the guns was a solid iron ball and a charge of black powder sufficient to propel it. By far the most common weapon on both sides was the smoothbore flintlock musket. British style "Brown Bess" muskets were .75 caliber; French patterns were .69. Americans used some of both. These muskets fired by striking a piece of flint against a piece of steel. This produced a shower of sparks that ignited priming powder in the flash pan beneath the barrel. The soldier carried his ammunition in the form of paper cartridges, each holding a charge of powder and a bullet. A competent infantryman could fire four shots a minute, and he could hope to hit a man-sized target at 80 to 100

yards. Usually he did not aim, however. Battle techniques called for laying down a field of fire with as many bullets in the air as possible, then charging or defending against a charge with the bayonet. Both sides used the same tactics.

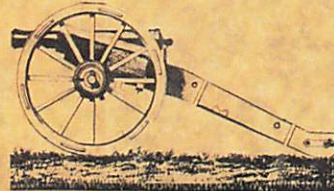
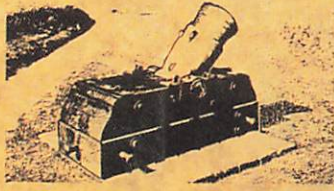
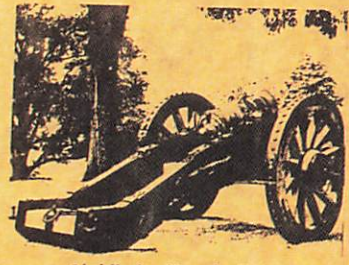
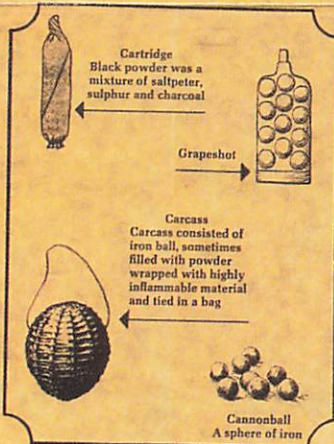
Some Americans had rifles instead of smoothbored muskets. These were superbly accurate weapons with effective ranges of four or five hundred yards. It took longer to load a rifle with loose powder from a powder horn and a tight-fitting ball wrapped in a piece of cloth. One or two shots a minute were maximum, and the rifle was too weak for bayonet fighting. When protected by men with muskets or used for sniping or scouting, however, riflemen were very effective. Still Washington preferred the musket for the great majority of his troops. Cavalrymen carried pistols or short versions of the musket, called carbines or musketons. These were effective only at very close quarters, and cavalry leaders considered the saber or broadsword their primary weapon.

Swords were used also by officers, and so were spears called "spontoons". Washington felt that a firearm would take

too much of an officer's attention away from his troops, and so he ordered all officers serving on foot to carry spontoons about 6½ feet long. The officers complied and actually fought with these spears. Other spears used during the war included long trench spears for defending fortifications and boarding pikes used by seamen.

The biggest of the weapons were the guns, howitzers and mortars of the artillery. Guns fired with a flat trajectory. They used solid iron balls for battering purposes and cluster enemy troops. Howitzers could fire with a flat trajectory or a higher arc to loft projectiles over fort walls. They could shoot the same projectiles as guns plus explosive shells. Mortars fired in a very high arc to drop projectiles over a wall or down on the deck of a ship. Usually mortars fired explosive shells or incendiary devices called carcasses to set fire to ships or buildings.

There were other projectiles and other weapons, but these were the principal tools with which Americans won their independence.



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